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## It's 'Better to Be Informed' About Tech Tools

Social Media Is Playing a Prominent Role in Profession's Future

**"We are witnessing a communications revolution."**

By Matthew Malamud, *News Contributor*



CREDIT: John Michael Yanson

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

That question dogs communications officers like Michelle Rogers of the University of North Carolina's School of Social Work, who, as director of communications, is responsible for ensuring that if a figurative tree falls

at her school, people will hear all about it.

From her office in Chapel Hill, Rogers manages public relations and marketing for the school. These days, social media tools make her job a whole lot easier, and they have the potential to revolutionize social work education and practice.

Wikipedia, an online social media encyclopedia that allows anyone to edit entries that's normally not an acceptable source for journalism but seems a fitting source for this topic, offers this explanation: Social media is the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue.

"[Social media] is a great way to bring people to our website and Contact, our online magazine, and promote news and events," Rogers said in an interview with NASW News. A banner announces to visitors of her school's website, [ssw.unc.edu](http://ssw.unc.edu): "Follow the

UNC School of Social Work on your favorite social media sites.” Clicking on the banner reveals a list of better known social media tools: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#), [YouTube](#) and [iTunes U](#).

Two benefits of social media in terms of public relations and marketing are its interactivity and the fact that it is instantaneous.

“Social media is more engaging, more of a conversation,” said Rogers. “Instead of just pushing news out, people can reply. And, as soon as I have a headline I can post it, as opposed to a printed publication.” She said she regularly receives feedback from the school’s nearly 1,100 Twitter followers and 800 Facebook fans.

Rogers also appreciates that social media is cheap. Facebook and Twitter accounts are free; so is hosting a blog. When the school moved Contact magazine online last year to [ssw.unc.edu/contact](#), they realized significant cost savings by not having to pay for the monthly printing and mailing of each issue.

Faculty members also have gotten into the social media game. For example, Anna Scheyett, UNC School of Social Work’s associate dean for academic affairs, has a blog on social work leadership at [sswleadership.blogspot.com](#). In a story about social media published online last year in Contact, Scheyett said, “I think [blogging is] a great way to disseminate information and offer a secondary education around what social work is.”

It’s here to stay. The UNC School of Social Work jumped on the social media bandwagon because, as Rogers put it, “it’s important to be where people are. Social media is only growing — by leaps and bounds.”

Facebook claims to have more than 500 million active users, while millions of people also have Twitter accounts. LinkedIn, a professional networking website, has more than 100 million members. Mobile technology allows people to be connected to the Internet and their personal and professional networks around the clock.

But while more and more people are embracing social media, there are holdouts, particularly older adults who came to computing later in life and those who are concerned about Internet privacy.

“Hoping that social media will go away is not a strategy,” insists Ebony Jackson, NASW’s senior Web and social media specialist, referring to some people’s expectation that more traditional communications and marketing tools would continue to flourish in a social media era. Instead, Jackson, who recently taught a course on social media for NASW staff in its Washington office, encourages people to embrace social media technology.

“We are witnessing a communications revolution, and with revolution comes resistance,” Jackson said in an interview with NASW News. “Some people are resistant to change — people resisted cell phones, they even resisted the telegraph. This revolution will likely affect your life in the near future. It’s better to be informed.”

Social workers who get hip to social media stand to benefit significantly, Jackson said.

Learning opportunities abound, and professional networking has never been easier. Through sites like LinkedIn, social workers can engage with other professionals from anywhere in the world, in real time, to gain advice and keep tabs on career opportunities. A newer website, [www.researchgate.net](#), facilitates collaboration among scientists, including social science researchers, and promises to “accelerate the distribution of new knowledge.”

Just like the UNC School of Social Work, social services organizations and clinicians in private practice can benefit from maintaining a social media presence. Social worker Michael Westfall of Manchester, Conn., is about to learn the benefits firsthand. Shortly after launching a private counseling practice earlier this year, he created a free Facebook page and low-cost website, [www.michaelwestfall.com](#).

“The Facebook page seemed like a no-brainer,” said Westfall. “It was fairly simple to set up — I already used it personally, so to make a professional page was easy. The website allows me to have my name out there, linkable.” Westfall said having an online

presence circumvents the referral process for bringing in potential clients, which he admitted wasn't really paying off, by establishing a direct link to consumers.

The key to using social media for business, according to Jackson, is to be search engine-optimized; most people find what they are looking for on the Internet through sites like Google and Yahoo.

"In this day and age, content is your friend," she said, meaning that more keyword-laden text is always better and redundancy isn't bad. This increases the likelihood that a webpage will be identified by a search engine's algorithm.

Social worker Nathaniel Hope of [www.nathanielhope.com](http://www.nathanielhope.com) said half of his clients in the Glenview, Ill., area found him through the Internet. But he's also using the Internet to educate clients. Hope maintains a YouTube channel featuring a collection of videos on mental health.

"I work with parents and kids with autism spectrum disorders, and I was having trouble explaining to one parent what Asperger's is," Hope said. "I told the parent to go to my YouTube channel where there is a short video of someone with Asperger's. That was really helpful."

Jackson believes social media is ripe for social workers to assert their expertise in psychosocial behavior. Social media can bring out people's antisocial behaviors. In addition to plugging in, turning on and tuning out, people engage in cyberbullying and online gambling, for example.

"Social workers already have the expertise to help clients who are experiencing these issues," Jackson said. "The key is to be familiar with the technology and 'speak the language.'"

She also sees potential in social media's ability to aid in self-care. "It's a great way to unplug from one's day-to-day professional life without having to leave the home." Social networking sites provide a means for social workers to "vent" about job-related stress, while websites such as YouTube — which, in addition to viral videos, contains countless instructional videos — allow people to pursue hobbies.

**Before you click 'send' ...** Social media technology seems to be evolving at breakneck speed, increasingly pervading aspects of daily life. With that comes ethical considerations, warns Kathryn Chernack, chairperson of the NASW New York State Chapter's ethics committee. Last month, she led a continuing education workshop, "Internet and Social Media Use: Boundary and Ethical Issues in Human Service Practice," at the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Social Work.

Chernack told NASW News that social workers have a responsibility to conduct themselves in the virtual world — just as in the physical world — in accordance with the profession's Code of Ethics.

"We have standards for the use of technology, and our responsibility is to stay current with the technology," she said.

At first blush, maintaining boundaries and client confidentiality online may seem relatively easy, provided a few simple rules are in place — don't become Facebook friends with clients, don't put identifying information about clients in a blog post, and so on. However, Chernack said it's much more complicated than that.

For example, Facebook regularly makes changes to its privacy settings, so even if a social worker isn't "friends" with a client, if his or her privacy settings aren't completely air-tight, the client may still be able to view certain things the social worker's Facebook profile, and vice versa.

Hope knows better than to encourage clients to friend him on Facebook because of confidentiality issues, but he said he was "horrified" by a recent Counselor Magazine article that began with a story about a counselor who became the target of a state licensing agency investigation after a former client, with whom the counselor became friends with on Facebook, committed suicide.

"When [the counselor] and his family went on vacation to a place where he had no Internet access, he was unable to read or respond to his former client's increasingly plaintive and, eventually, desperate Facebook posts," the story said. "Feeling abandoned, the ex-client sent [the counselor] one final message threatening suicide if he did not respond to her. Getting no response from [the counselor], the patient ended her life."

Still, Hope is interested in the potential uses of social media. He said he is curious about using Skype — an Internet videophone service — to provide therapy to clients remotely but isn't sure about the legal and ethical ramifications. "The question is," Hope said, "I'm licensed in Illinois. Can I see someone in Wisconsin? That isn't clear."

Chernack is concerned that people also are too trusting of Internet technology. "I've encountered in speaking to social workers many people who feel it is not a big deal to allow clients to make an appointment via email; however, email is archived and someone who is tech-savvy can get at that information," she added.

She's also observed that younger people, including social workers, may have different expectations of privacy. "They are used to sharing a whole lot of information online," she said, adding that some may post information in an accessible place that includes content or comments they wouldn't want future employers or clients to see.

Social media is "virgin territory as far as ethics is concerned," Hope said. "A lot of questions need to be answered and I don't know we have all the answers yet."

For information on the NASW Code of Ethics, see [www.naswdc.org/pubs/code](http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code).

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